When the Whole Classroom Starts to Fall Apart

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How to respond when several students begin engaging in disruptive behavior at the same time, and how to help the classroom recover.

There is a scene in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in which a disturbance among patients in a psychiatric hospital escalates into chaos on the ward. Christopher Lloyd plays one of the patients involved in the disturbance, and Jack Nicholson's character becomes involved as the situation grows increasingly difficult for the hospital staff to manage.

I remember that scene being used as an example during my early years working with students who had a tendency to engage in serious, unsafe behaviors.

The students I worked with were what we called institutionally savvy, which meant they had been in residential treatment facilities and had learned what could happen when a group of children got together and engaged in overt misbehavior at the same time.

When several students simultaneously engage in serious problem behavior, they can exhaust the resources of the available staff. The situation can become dangerous, resulting in destruction, injury, and a rapid deterioration in the adults' ability to maintain safety and order. And, of course, when this happens in a school environment, it can eliminate the capacity of the adults to teach.

Sometimes students have learned to engage in these behaviors specifically to avoid instruction. Not because learning doesn't bring joy, but because their experiences of instruction have been experiences of failure, rejection, and feeling stupid or inadequate.

Naturally, if instructional situations have historically caused those kinds of feelings, you're going to do what you can to avoid them.

Now, what do you do when a group of students simultaneously begins to engage in problem behaviors?

Well, that's what I want to talk about.

The Work Begins Before the Disruption

First of all, the strategies needed to respond to these kinds of situations must begin long before the situations happen.

When you are working with a group of students who tend to react to one another's problem behavior, or who tend to respond negatively when provoked to anger by a peer, you have to teach them early and often how to ignore those provocations and move in a positive direction behaviorally.

You have to demonstrate that the adults in the classroom can be trusted to protect them, and that students do not have to defend themselves against every insult or provocation from another student.

You also need to establish consistent expectations and reinforcement systems so that students have a history of experiencing positive consequences for doing what they are supposed to do.

And perhaps most importantly, you need to create a classroom in which the ordinary activities are enjoyable and reinforcing, so that participating in the classroom is something students want to do.

But what if the disruption has already started?

What if two or three students are now standing up, running around the room, provoking one another, or engaging in behaviors that are drawing the attention of the rest of the class?

Identify the Student Who Is Driving the Disruption

The first thing I want to do is identify the leader, if there is one.

And there often is a student whose behavior is having a particularly strong influence on what the other students are doing.

Sometimes that student is the first person who engaged in problem behavior, but sometimes it isn't.

Sometimes the first student engaged in disruptive behavior for an entirely individual reason. It may have had nothing to do with the group. The student was frustrated or upset, and the behavior just happened to be disruptive.

But another student may have recognized that the first student's behavior was occupying the attention and resources of an adult. And that student may have capitalized on the opportunity to reduce the adult resources even further, so that the structure of the classroom begins to collapse.

One of the things I look for is a student who isn't simply participating in the disruption but is actively encouraging other students to do more.

This student may be telling other students to continue misbehaving, encouraging them to escalate, or deliberately provoking the student who is already the most agitated or volatile.

That is an important distinction. The leader is not necessarily the student who is engaging in the most serious behavior. Sometimes the student who is the most dysregulated is being encouraged by another student who recognizes that further escalation will destabilize the classroom.

And the student who is encouraging the behavior may be relatively calm while doing it.

Now there may be opportunities to get something the student wants. It might be the entertaining value of having a lot of people running around angry, which can be dramatic and interesting to watch. It might be an opportunity to take something from the teacher's desk while the adults are occupied. Or it might simply be that while all this is happening, instruction can't take place, and the student doesn't have to struggle with subtraction with regrouping.

These are different possible functions of behavior, and we should not assume that every student who participates in the disruption is doing so for the same reason.

But when we are trying to restore order, it can be very helpful to recognize which students are actively encouraging the behavior of others.

Don't Try to Talk to Four Students at Once

One of the common errors classroom leaders make when three or four students are misbehaving at the same time is to address the entire group.

The adult says something to everybody, trying to cause all of them to change their behavior simultaneously.

But what you're doing in that situation is talking to three or four individuals at the same time and asking all of them to engage in a specific behavior, or broadly to stop doing whatever they're doing.

If the behavioral momentum of the classroom is already negative, if it is already tending toward chaos, your voice is probably going to be relatively ineffective at causing three or four students to change their behavior all at once.

Now, there may be one student whose conscience gets to them, who hears you saying something to the whole group and responds as though you had spoken to them individually.

But if you want a student to respond, talk to that student individually.

You don't have four voices that you can use at once. You only have one voice, so you need to choose whom you're going to address directly.

Use the student's name. Speak in a firm and calm voice. Tell the student specifically what you want them to do and where you want them to go.

> “Tommy, sit down. Sit down right now. I’m talking to you.”

The purpose is not to intimidate the student. The purpose is to communicate that while it may seem as though the classroom is getting out of control, you are still present, you are still directing the situation, and you can still give that student a direction.

Of course, this assumes that the immediate safety needs of the classroom are being addressed. When students are in danger, the priority is protecting them, not establishing compliance with an ordinary classroom direction.

Rely on the Behavioral History You’ve Established

If you have developed any kind of behavioral history with that student, they have learned what the positive and negative consequences are of doing what they are supposed to do when you tell them, and not doing what they’re supposed to do.

Directly addressing that student should bring to mind the contingencies that you have established by consistently implementing them.

There is an implication that you will do what you reliably do in that situation.

And that is much more difficult to accomplish when you’re talking to a group of students at the same time.

You don’t necessarily need to promise a reward or threaten a consequence. Promises of rewards can be helpful when teaching contingencies, but contingencies become valuable once they are learned through experience over time.

We don’t want to create new contingencies all the time for behaviors that are happening moment to moment.

In emotionally heightened situations, students may interpret warnings as threats. And when adults begin offering increasingly attractive rewards in exchange for cooperation, students may learn that escalation is an effective way to negotiate for something better.

Instead, we want to rely on the expectations and consequences that have already been established.

What If the Student Refuses?

Now, what happens if you address the student directly and the student refuses to do what you’ve asked?

This is another reason why it is so important to have clear systems and consistent expectations established before difficult situations occur.

If you have been clear and consistent, the student already knows what the follow-through will be. And the other students know it, too.

You don’t necessarily have to argue with the student, raise your voice, or keep repeating the direction. You don’t have to invent a more serious consequence in the moment.

Sometimes you just need to be willing to wait.

That doesn't mean ignoring unsafe behavior or allowing other students to be hurt. It means remaining calm, maintaining safety, and allowing the student the opportunity to de-escalate without turning the situation into a contest between the student and the adult.

Once the student has de-escalated, the predictable follow-through can occur in accordance with the expectations and behavior plan that have already been established.

The important thing is that the adult's response remains consistent. The student does not need to wonder whether this particular incident will produce an entirely different set of consequences because the teacher has become frustrated or overwhelmed.

Recognize the Students Who Endured the Disruption

There is another group of students we need to pay particular attention to during these situations.

They are the students who are doing exactly what we have taught them to do.

They are tolerating the disruption. They are remaining calm. They are resisting the temptation to become involved, even though another student's behavior may be provoking them or making it difficult to continue what they were doing.

I think we should reinforce that patient tolerance generously.

When the episode is over, I want those students to know how much I appreciate their willingness to help the student who was in crisis by not escalating the situation further.

We can lavish praise on them for their patience, their kindness, and their willingness to cooperate with the adults.

We can also provide meaningful positive reinforcement through the systems we have already established in the classroom.

This is important because we are teaching students that maintaining their composure during a difficult situation is something we genuinely value.

And we are also teaching them that they have an important role in helping to maintain a safe, positive classroom environment.

Get One Student Responding, Then Move to the Next

Once you have one student responding to the sound of your voice, you have begun to change the situation.

Now, as long as you can keep that student cooperating, you want to continue attending to that student and recognizing what they're doing.

You can talk to the student as though they are doing exactly what they're supposed to do. You can remind them that what they're doing is what you expect, and that their cooperation is valuable.

You want to maintain the relationship with that student.

Then move on to the next student and do the same thing.

Address the student individually, give a clear direction, and recognize their cooperation. As long as you can maintain the cooperation of the students you've already reached, you can continue moving through the group.

Sometimes, when you are able to interrupt the behavior of the student who has been driving the disruption, the others calm down and begin responding to adult directions more readily.

The important thing is that you are no longer trying to change everyone's behavior simultaneously. You are working with individual students, gradually restoring cooperation and changing the behavioral momentum of the classroom.

When Safety Is Compromised

There are situations where a student's behavior becomes so unsafe that the classroom must be evacuated.

Sometimes students have been hurt, or the risk of injury is so significant that removing the other students from the environment is the safest available response. In those circumstances, staff need to follow the student's safety plan and the school's established emergency procedures.

But I think it is worth considering what happens when a classroom team learns to manage escalating behavior before it reaches that point.

If the team can prevent injury, remain calm, and keep students safe without unnecessarily disrupting the entire classroom, the other students have an opportunity to experience something important.

They have an opportunity to discover that even when another student is emotionally dysregulated, even when a situation is difficult or frightening, the adults can manage the situation and help everyone get through it safely.

And as students have more experiences in which the adults respond calmly and effectively, they may begin to develop a greater sense of safety and assurance.

They learn that they can get through difficult situations, that the adults will protect them, and that their day can continue.

There is another consideration here as well.

When a student engages in behavior that results in the entire classroom being evacuated, the student may learn that their behavior can disrupt the whole schedule. Depending on the function of the behavior, that may actually strengthen the very behavior we're trying to reduce.

And the other students lose opportunities for instruction that they may have really enjoyed or benefited from. They may also miss other reinforcing experiences and activities because their day has been derailed.

This does not mean that we should avoid evacuation when it is necessary for safety. It means that we should develop the skills, staffing, and preventative strategies that reduce the likelihood of reaching that point in the first place.

Returning to Teaching After the Disruption

Regardless of how we get through a crisis, there is something important that needs to happen after it is over.

I think it is good to have a classroom discussion and talk through what happened, provided the students are ready and the discussion can be conducted in a way that protects everyone's dignity.

We should be open about the fact that something difficult happened, without shame, and make absolutely sure that we are not shaming the student who engaged in problem behavior.

Instead, we frame it as a student who is learning, just like we're all learning.

Yes, it was a hard thing to go through. But we are safe, and we will get through these things together.

This is part of how we learn and grow together, by giving space for one another's faults.

I think there is something very important about that kind of classroom environment.

We are not trying to create a classroom where nobody ever makes a mistake, nobody ever becomes frustrated, and nobody ever engages in behavior that makes life difficult for somebody else.

We are trying to create a classroom where students can learn better ways of responding to those situations, where adults can be trusted to maintain safety, and where relationships can continue even after something difficult has happened.

And we want the ordinary activities of the classroom to resume. We want students to return to learning, to participating, and to enjoying the positive experiences that we have intentionally built into their day.

Because the purpose of managing challenging behavior is not simply to stop the behavior.

The purpose is to create the conditions in which teaching and learning can continue.

This kind of leadership is a unique and challenging instructional responsibility. But with experience, teachers and classroom teams can learn how to manage these situations in ways that help everyone learn important and valuable lessons, even through the most difficult behavioral circumstances.

References

Forman, M. (Director). (1975). *One flew over the cuckoo's nest* [Film]. Fantasy Films.

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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How to cite this resource

Beddow, P. (2026). When the Whole Classroom Starts to Fall Apart. Accessible Behavior. https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/when-the-whole-classroom-starts-to-fall-apart

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